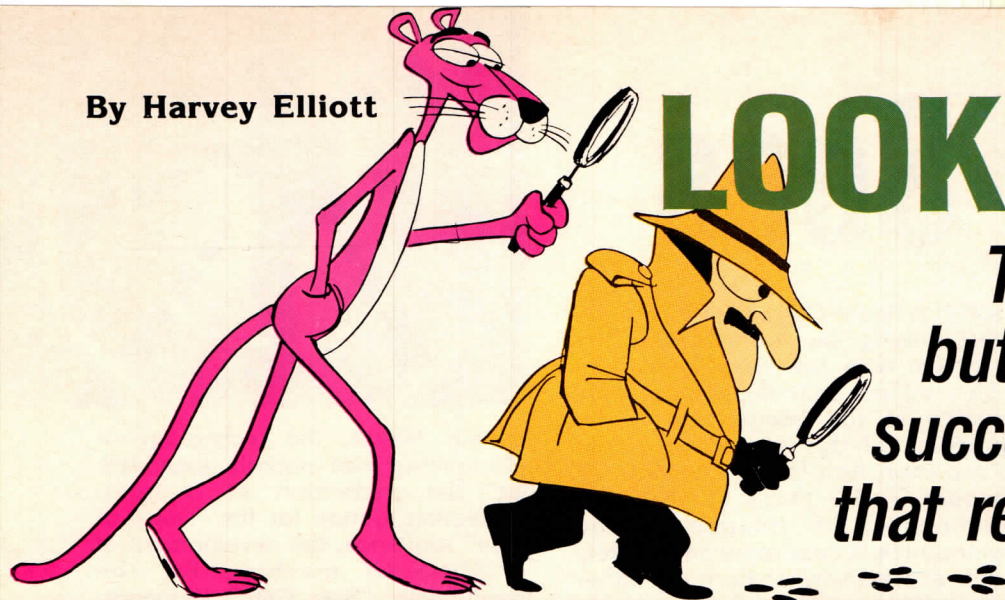


By Harvey Elliott



LOOKING FOR

*The man is gone
but left behind is a
succession of masks
that remain his legacy*



Peter Sellers liked to think of himself as invisible. He felt he was a faceless man, able only to hide beneath his many characters because no personality existed under the makeup and behind the voices he employed. He made 53 feature films while he was alive — the characters he played number well over 60 — and, because of an unprecedented graverobbing enterprise, Sellers even made one picture several years after he died. But he never believed he found himself.

Much was made by his biographer, Alexander Walker, of Sellers' almost pathological fear of not being able to "find" the character — something he did almost solely, at first, through externals. Sellers would manufacture a walk or, through hours of experimentation, stumble upon a voice that would define the person he was preparing to play. He felt he could do this because he started from a clean slate: his own invisible face and voice, unfamiliar to the public.

Role-playing was only a part of Sellers' genius, but it comes staggeringly into focus when one reviews his career on home video. At this writing, 14 of his films are on cassette, including most of the movies he made as the one indelible character he created: Inspector Clouseau.

If the tremendous popularity of Clouseau became an albatross to Sellers, who couldn't abide the boredom that set in when he had worked on a character too long, he had to admit that it was Clouseau who came to his rescue in mid-career when his temperament, paranoia, and self-indulgence resulted in a run of bad, even unreleasable movies that threatened to extinguish his career altogether.

Now we face a future without Peter Sellers, and no one acting in movies today has the versatility he showed — and was obsessed with — from the beginning of his career.

That career was capped by a brilliant, serene impersonation of a "nobody" in *Being There*, which some have suggested was Sellers playing his unadorned self.

PETER SELLERS



Sellers and Spike Milligan were central to *The Goon's* success.

Seen as the climax of a unique career in movie comedy, it looks more complex, and *Being There* stands as a testament to Sellers' ability to build with tiny, bland moments of observation as well as with large, colourful ones. His Chance Gardiner was no less constructed than his Clouseau or his Strangelove; the ingredients he used were more delicate.

The Goons

Sellers' first major screen role was as a member of Alec Guinness' weird band of bankrobbers in *The Ladykillers*. In the midst of a highly successful British television career as a star (with Spike Milligan and Harry Secombe) of *The Goon Show*, Sellers had often been compared to Guinness, with his facility for disguises and multiple personalities. *The Ladykillers*, a dark comic farce in which five criminals pose as a group of chamber musicians to lure a charming old lady named Mrs Wilberforce into performing as their patsy in a criminal escapade, gave the movie public its first look at a slightly pudgy, open-faced young man with a mass of tousled hair who would, within three years, be headlining British comedies of his own.

Another of the musician/thieves was Herbert Lom, who years later would become Sellers' most familiar adversary as Chief Inspector Dreyfus, the man Clouseau drove crazy in the "Pink Panther" series. In *The Ladykillers* he doesn't even twitch when Sellers is around.

Other British comedies followed, like *The Naked Truth*, the first film in which Sellers tried a multiplicity of disguises. He plays a Scottish television personality named Wee Sonny MacGregor, who is blackmailed by a *Truth*-type tabloid into coming up with a nice sum of money or being revealed as the unpopular slumlord he is. He joins forces with Terry Thomas and other victims of the unsavoury publisher in a plot to do away with him, impersonating several outrageous characters to accomplish the task. The cloying MacGregor is itself a master portrait of insincerity as the TV hero brings on "real people" as his guests and then dresses up and imitates them as they're appearing on his program.

I'm All Right, Jack contains the most famous of his early characters, as Sellers played a factory foreman and union leader, Fred Kite, thrown into a turmoil when an eager and idiotic young worker (Ian Carmichael) instigates a strike that paralyses the British economy. A gentle satire by the Boulting Brothers of the "every man for himself" philosophy that had infused postwar complacency, *Jack* brought Sellers solid acclaim as the comic labourer who simplistically longed for a life in Russia, the workers' paradise, "with all them wheat fields and ballet in the evening."

Two-Way Stretch cast Sellers as a prison inmate who breaks out of jail on the eve of his release, commits a robbery, breaks back into jail, and is released on schedule the next morning fit with a perfect alibi. With more than a bit of Goonish humour — "Mind closin' the window? There's a bit of George Raft in 'ere" — *Two-Way Stretch* featured a twinkling young Sellers.

His next film, *The Battle of the Sexes*, found him playing a doddering old clerk in the accounting department of a Scottish firm. An American career woman (anathema to Thurber, who wrote "The Catbird Seat," on which *Sexes* was based) arrives to automate the factory, threatening to make Sellers obsolete. He has no choice but to plan her murder, which he tries to execute with a physical hilarity that prefigures Clouseau in its masterfully choreographed clumsiness.

As if these changes in character weren't rapid and drastic enough, Sellers' next project was a harsh and unrelenting drama called *Never Let Go*, as if to underline his range with a nasty and violent portrayal of an underworld criminal. Audiences and critics detested *Never Let Go* but, in retrospect, it's a fascinating and riveting role in a psychologically interesting drama.



As Chance Gardiner, Sellers revealed a lot of his own character.

A likely explanation of its negative reception is that old bugaboo of the comic actor: everyone wanted to laugh at the terribly funny comedian, but when the comedian tried to get serious, the rejection was immediate and absolute.

These British films in Sellers' early career are real collectibles for the Sellers fan, and are recommended for those who want to see what led up to Clouseau.

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LOOKING FOR PETER SELLERS

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Unfortunately *The Mouse that Roared*, his first international success and a movie in which he played multiple roles, isn't on video yet. Even without it, though, we have an idea why American producers were soon chasing after Sellers.

Genius Plus Genius

Stanley Kubrick was the first major filmmaker to tap Sellers' talents, and he would do it twice within two years. In *Lolita* — which looks great today with its inspired casting of James Mason, Shelley Winters, and Sellers as Clare Quilty, the man who stole *Lolita* away from Humbert Humbert — Sellers also employs several disguises, but well within the dramatic context of the mysterious Quilty, a poet and university lecturer who is never quite what he seems.

Sellers' American accent is also dead-on. But then, accents were never any trouble for him. It is truly impossible, when sitting down to one of his films for the first time, to spot a Sellers entrance with ears only, so varied and detailed are his various voices.

More Kubrick roles followed in *Dr Strangelove*, in which he memorably played the President of the United States and a crippled neo-Nazi maniac with a doomsday machine. This is one of the cinema's best anti-war satires, with its dead-serious clowning by Sellers, George C. Scott, Sterling Hayden, and Slim Pickens. It's definitely worth seeing because, like *Lolita*, it's Sellers working with a brilliant director, and that didn't happen often.

After a couple of other small comedies — one of which, *Heaven's Above*, is delightful as Sellers plays a parish vicar sent by mistake to a trouble-filled area of rural England — Sellers was no longer a comedian for a limited public.

It was at this point that *The Pink Panther* made its appearance. Peter Sellers had finally found a face that stuck.

The Panther Debuts

Blake Edwards fashioned a comedy/mystery around a chalet stocked with romantic strangers, one of whom — in disguise as "the Phantom" — was in the process of robbing a Middle Eastern princess of "the most valuable jewel in the world". The diamond was called the Pink Panther because of a flaw in the shape of a tiny rose-coloured cat. The movie had its popular stars: David Niven and Robert Wagner as a father-and-son team of thieves, the glamorous young Italian actress Claudia Cardinale as the Princess, and the exotic Capucine as the wife of a police inspector who doublecrosses her

husband and the law to join forces with the Phantom.

But they were all secondary to the impact Sellers made with his good-hearted, bumbling, tenacious Inspector Clouseau, who emerged victorious despite incredible odds. Sellers brought along a bottomless bag of tricks, including a wildly comic French accent, an affinity for broad slapstick, and a new (for Sellers) vulnerability and sweetness that made his idiotic antics lovable even in their eventual familiarity.

Before *The Pink Panther* was released Sellers and Edwards had begun work on a sequel, but were as yet unaware of the success that the first film would bring. The sequel simply incorporated the Clouseau character into a screen adaptation of the stage farce *A Shot in the Dark*, and didn't even refer to the Panther. Clouseau's character was honed and refined, even adding to the recipe an irresistible attractiveness to women that was as unlikely and as refreshingly comic as his other dubious claims to success.

With Elke Sommer as a French maid accused of murder, *A Shot in the Dark* was a successful bridge from the original *Panther* movie to a string of formula sequels and introduced two characters that would become indispensable: Clouseau's manservant Cato, and his superior and archenemy Inspector Dreyfus. Burt Kwouk and Herbert Lom turned these roles into the most familiar of their careers.

But the series was not assured by the popularity of *The Pink Panther* and *A Shot in the Dark*. When Edwards wanted to make even more Clouseau films, Sellers balked. First of all, he was sidelined by a serious heart attack which sent him into an intense re-examination of his career, punctuated for the next 16 years by a morbid concentration on "how much time" was left for him. Second, he and

Among the less known of Seller's films is *The Optimist*. It is a sentimental story about a couple of London slum children who befriend an old busker. His low-key performance deserved much more praise than it received.



Sellers' affair with Liza Minnelli was only one of numerous disastrous relationships.

Edwards had never gotten along: theirs was a classic love/hate relationship in which each depended on the other for the most successful movies either had made.

The Panther Disappears

So Clouseau was filed away. Sellers did a wild turn as a longhaired, womanizing German psychiatrist named Fassbender in *What's New, Pussycat?* — a mid-'60s comedy that is still funny and, in retrospect, much more fun than anything he did since.

Co-starring with Peter O'Toole, Woody Allen, Ursula Andress, and the luscious Paula Prentiss as a suicidal beat poetess, Sellers contributed to an anarchic farce that was loud, fast, funny, and more controlled than anything Blake Edwards led him through.

Things were beginning to slide, however. After *Pussycat*, Sellers entered a decade of decline. He was difficult to work with, and after the unjustified failure of a funny Neil Simon comedy, *After the Fox*, and the disastrous *Casino Royale*, which rendered him virtually unemployable in Hollywood, Sellers was suddenly an actor nobody cared much about seeing.

He performed in a quiet, short segment of a Shirley MacLaine film directed in Italy by Vittorio de Sica, *Woman Times Seven*. While his episode (the first) was the best in the film, the rest rendered *Woman* unwatchable.



The Bobo was a vehicle for Sellers and his new wife, Britt Ekland, in which he played a musical matador who has to win and bed a beautiful sexpot named Olimpia to win a singing engagement at a local nightclub. It's a fluffy film, but not without charm, especially where Sellers is concerned. The vulnerability he brings to bear is just enough to make it a likeable addition to the Sellers career.

He again refused to revive Clouseau for Blake Edwards, forcing Edwards to hire Alan Arkin for *Inspector Clouseau*, a quick flop. They did reunite in a witless compendium of slapstick and sight gags called *The Party*, which Edwards auteurs staunchly defend, to the consternation of most reasonable moviegoers. Then Sellers made *I Love You, Alice B. Toklas*, a badly dated comedy in which Sellers plays a middle-aged businessman who falls in love with a flower child and changes into a pot-smoking hippie. Apart from two funny supporting performances by Joyce Van Patten as his straight fiancée and Jo Van Fleet as his Jewish mother, *Toklas* is a one-joke script whose trendiness was out-of-date even by the time of its release.

Down and Out

Peter Sellers went back to England, broken and discouraged. He didn't work for two years. In 1970 he made the Monty Pythonesque *Magic Christian*, based on Terry Southern's book and littered with star cameos by people like Raquel Welch, Laurence Harvey, and Christopher Lee.

It starred Sellers as Sir Guy Grand, the richest man in England, and Ringo Starr as his adopted son, and it dealt with greed.

The central conceit of the movie — that anyone will do anything if given enough money — was hilariously funny at times, and if director Joe McGrath had kept *Christian* on course it might have turned into a big hit. But the script, by two members of the future Python team, meanders and we are left with some strikingly original and funny scenes in the middle of great patches that just don't work. A final scene rivals *Monty Python's The Meaning of Life* for its sheer gutsy bad

What's Available

Being There

Colour. 1979. Peter Sellers, Shirley MacLaine, Jack Warden. 130 min. CBS-Fox.

The Fiendish Plot of Dr Fu Manchu

Colour. 1980. Peter Sellers, Helen Mirren, Sid Caesar. 100 min. Warners.

The Great McGonagall

Colour. 1980. Peter Sellers, Spike Milligan, Julie Foster. 95 min. Golden Lion.

Hoffman

Colour. 1970. Peter Sellers, Sinead Cusack. 109 min. Thorn EMI.

I'm All Right, Jack

B&W. 1959. Peter Sellers. Ian Carmichael, Terry Thomas and Richard Attenborough. 101 min. Thorn EMI.

The Magic Christian

Colour. 1970. Peter Sellers, Ringo Starr, Richard Attenborough. 92 min. K&C Video.

Murder by Death

Colour. 1976. Peter Falk, Alec Guinness, Peter Sellers. 94 min. RCA/Columbia.

The Optimist

Colour. 1973. Peter Sellers, Donna Mullane, John Chaffey. 110 min. Video Classics.

The Pink Panther

Colour. 1964. Peter Sellers, David Niven, Robert Wagner. 113 mins. Warners.

The Pink Panther Strikes Again

Colour. 1976. Peter Sellers, Herbert Lom, Lesley-Anne Down. 113 min. Warners.

The Return of the Pink Panther

Colour. 1975. Peter Sellers, Christopher Plummer, Catherine Schnell. 113 min. CBS-Fox.

Revenge of the Pink Panther

Colour. 1978. Peter Sellers, Dyan Cannon, Herbert Lom. 99 min. Warners.

There's a Girl in My Soup

Colour. 1970. Peter Sellers, Goldie Hawn. 96 min. RCA/Columbia.

What's New Pussycat?

Colour. 1965. Peter O'Toole, Peter Sellers, Woody Allen. 108 min. Warners.

taste, and no one should miss Yul Brynner in drag crooning Noel Coward's "Mad About the Boy" to Roman Polanski. Is this a recommendation? I guess, guiltily, it is.

The Boulting Brothers tried to rescue their former colleague with *Their's a Girl in My Soup*, which cast Sellers uncharismatically with Goldie Hawn and made scarcely a ripple at the box office. He played the March Hare in a couple of scenes with Dudley Moore in a boring, overdressed musical film of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, which boasted a roster of guest stars whom one would have to be an agent to recognise.

He made three films that were never released, three that disappeared after only weeks of playing, and one, *The Great McGonagall*, that reunited him with his *Goon Show* comrades and proved he couldn't go home again. *McGonagall* is the type of film for which the Fast-Forward button was invented.

By 1975, when Blake Edwards beckoned yet again, Peter Sellers couldn't say no, and though the new *Panther* movies didn't stretch him at all, they brought him a financial solvency and artistic confidence that led him to a final triumph four years later. Edwards cranked out the most superficial aspects of *The Pink Panther* and *A Shot in the Dark* and plunked Sellers down in the middle

of things; miraculously, Sellers always came out looking brilliant, even when everything was a mess around him.

The Return of the Pink Panther attempted to carry on the storyline of the original, reviving the jewel plot, "the Phantom," and the animated credit sequence (which by then had been turned into an industry of its own be De Patie-Freleng).

The Pink Panther Strikes Again not only had nothing to do with the Pink Panther — had Edwards forgotten, in his desire for commercial success, that his central character was named Inspector Clouseau and not the Pink Panther? — but sank Clouseau in an ersatz-James Bond plot that revolved totally around Inspector Dreyfus's attempts to exterminate Clouseau. *Who Strikes again?* (The highlight of this entry is the opening credits, with the animated Panther paying tribute to screen classics; his Julie Andrews is a delight.)

Sellers took time out for another Neil Simon movie, *Murder by Death*, in which he played Charlie Chan invited to a dinner party for great detectives of the world who are asked to solve a murder.

The storyline wandered away and the movie made little sense, but Sellers was amusing as the epigrammatic Chinese detective — much funnier than he would

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LOOKING FOR PETER SELLERS

Continued from page 23

be in his final film, *The Fiendish Plot of Dr Fu Manchu*, which had neither wit, Neil Simon, or (by 1980) a healthy Sellers. But Edwards was standing in the wings, ready to whisk Sellers off to another chapter of Clouseau.

The Revenge of the Pink Panther was about Clouseau and the Mafia, and by this time the series did little that couldn't have been accomplished by total animation, since the whole enterprise resembled nothing more than a shabby cartoon.

Getting There

But if this surfeit of Sellers-by-rote accomplished anything, it made *Being There* possible. *Being There* was Peter Sellers' reason for surviving; it was the Golden Fleece he pursued through all the dreck and exploitation he allowed to happen to himself, and it fulfilled him once and for all. It's impossible to watch anyone else when Sellers is on-screen, and he's not falling down, mangling the French language, or making faces.

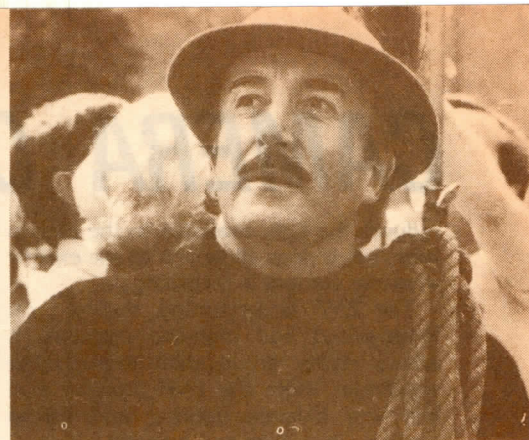
Hal Ashby tacked on an end-credits section of outtakes that show Sellers repeatedly muffing dialogue and breaking up with laughter at his inability

to get the scene right. It was funny — but wildly inappropriate for Sellers' great, serious performance. Some think it cost him the Oscar. Ashby's insensitivity to his own achievement, not to mention Sellers', reveals much about the accident of success.

We know, at least, what the Pink Panther is without Peter Sellers. Two years after Sellers' death, Blake Edwards, who now billed himself in the opening logo of *The Trail of the Pink Panther* as BLAKE ENTERTAINMENT EDWARDS, decided to wring one more Clouseau adventure out of Peter Sellers' career.

Using about 24 minutes of unused Sellers footage (mostly from *Return of the Pink Panther* and a bit from *Revenge*) and 16 minutes of repeats, Edwards constructed a flimsy comedy that began with yet another burglary of the Pink Panther and proceeded not to solve it — resorting instead to a haphazard portrait of Clouseau's career. Clouseau had been conveniently placed on a sabotaged airplane by old costars in former *Panther* movies, Kwouk's Cato talks about his attacks on Clouseau and narrates a couple of rerun scenes of Clouseau slapstick; Lom's Dreyfus remembers his feud with Clouseau — more reruns.

Capucine and a seriously ill David

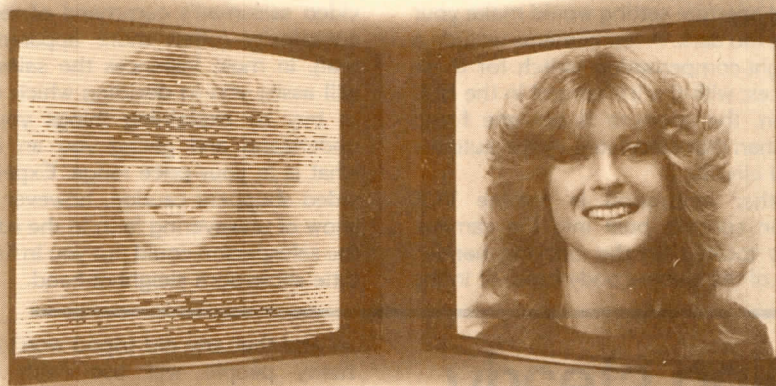


The serious side of Sellers shows through the Clouseau make up.

Niven are trotted out (with Rich Little dubbing Niven's unusable voice) to introduce highlights from *The Pink Panther*. Elke Sommer probably wasn't available. This is a comedy devoid of laughs. BLAKE EXPLOITATION EDWARDS is more like it. At press time it remains to be seen whether the Panther will survive the cinema run, with *Curse of the Pink Panther* slated to appear without Sellers altogether.

Peter Sellers has always had his detractors, most of whom identify him with the Panther movies. But as this impressive video library attests, Sellers was more than the bumbling Clouseau. He was a man searching for an identity in a career that gave him many chances to find it.

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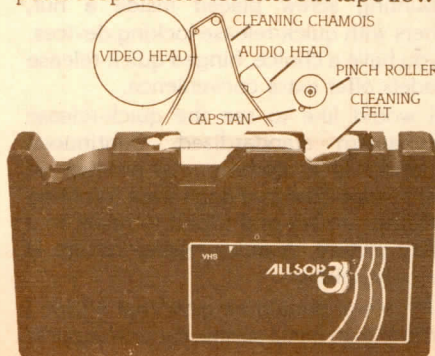


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